



## **Relational dialectics as a framework for community-campus partners to collaborate despite differences**

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### **Summary**

Community and campus partners face differences as they span boundaries to work together. Successful collaboration between community-campus partners involves navigating differences and managing related tensions to promote reciprocity, mutual benefit, and long-term sustainability. Still, tensions between partners are often seen as problems, indicating that something is wrong and must be fixed. Presenters will introduce *relational dialectics*, which argues for positively framing tensions between partners as inherent and natural.

Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) assumes: (a) that life is relational and that relationships are characterized by change; (b) relational change is not

linear but multidirectional, has many different possible meanings, and is never finished; (c) contradictions or dialectical tensions are inherent and fundamental in relational life; and (d) communication is central to organizing and negotiating relational dialectics, which help each person (in a partnership to) constitute his/her social reality (West & Turner, 2010, p. 204).

We will share evidence from the literature as a way to introduce tensions we've experienced or studied. In the session participants will be encouraged to share their own stories about tensions they've experienced in campus-community partnerships as a way to connect their personal knowing to theory. We will examine common tensions, identify consequences of communication responses and discuss the usefulness of developing scales that measure different types of tensions, the severity or frequency of tensions, and partners' responses to tensions.

Ultimately, dialectical thinking and related conversations set up conditions and processes necessary to help partners develop a sense of "connected knowing" and to achieve the goals of trust, mutual respect, and reciprocity. This approach to collaborative communication can help participants to think in new ways, respond effectively to differences, and sustain their partnerships over time.

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